

THE BOUNDARIES OF EVANGELICALISM I A Review Article

John F. Brug

How to be Evangelical Without Being Conservative, by
Roger E. Olson. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008. 202
pp, hc, \$16.99.

What does it mean to be evangelical? What does it mean to be Evangelical? We confessional Lutherans regularly use “evangelical” as part of our label—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church. To us “evangelical” means focused on the gospel. The doctrine on which the church stands or falls is the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone. The one great mission of the church is to share this message with the world. Everything else in the church, including the preaching of the law, serves this mission. To be evangelical means to understand the distinction between the law and the gospel and to apply them both correctly, with the law serving the gospel. That is why we call ourselves “evangelical.” But does our being evangelical mean that we are Evangelicals? What is an Evangelical?

Evangelicalism was founded in the mid-20th century to occupy a place between liberalism and fundamentalism. Evangelicals wanted to stand apart from the doctrinal liberalism of the mainline Protestant churches, therefore Evangelicalism resembled fundamentalism in its loyalty to a basic core of biblical doctrine, but it also wanted to distance itself from the separatism of fundamentalism and from what it regarded as fundamentalism’s legalistic rules about life style (no alcohol, no dancing, etc.). Evangelicalism wanted to cultivate a more mainstream image and to gain greater intellectual respect from society.

Now, more than half a century later, Evangelicalism is experiencing something of an identity crisis. In recent years the American media have often portrayed Evangelicalism as a movement aimed at promoting conservative religion, theology, politics, and social attitudes in society. The Evangelical movement is often closely linked with fundamentalism by the media. In the mind of some Evangelicals a new brand of Fundamentalism, masquerading as Evangelicalism, seems to be infringing on the Evangelical brand name. Some Evangelicals are uncomfortable with this trend and want to restore the breathing space

between Evangelicalism and this new Fundamentalism by demonstrating that it is possible to be Evangelical without being conservative, and that “post-conservative Evangelicals” may have a more valid claim to that label than the fundamentalists who are infringing on the brand name.

This effort would not be all bad if Olson’s only aim was to distance post-conservative Evangelicalism from the social and political activism of the fundamentalist-tinged Moral Majority and other Christian America movements. But Olson also aims to disassociate Evangelicalism from conservative doctrine. The crucial question raised by this book is whether in so doing Olson has repositioned his brand of Evangelicalism so that it now overlaps with the theological liberalism from which Evangelicals fled.

Olson summarizes Evangelicalism under five points: 1) bibli-
cism—belief in the supreme authority of the Bible for faith and life, 2) conversionism—belief in a radical conversion by personal repentance and a life-long relationship with Christ, 3) crucicentrism—piety, devotion, and worship centered on the cross of Christ, 4) activism—social transformation through evangelism and social action; and 5) respect for the great tradition of Christian doctrine. Though Evangelicals are generally respectful of basic Christian doctrine, Evangelicalism is defined not so much as a matter of adherence to a set of doctrines but as a shared experience of spirituality centered around the Bible, the cross, conversion, devotion, and evangelism.

Olson presents twelve theses which argue that it is possible to be Evangelical without being conservative. Seven of these have to do with political and social aspects of Evangelicalism.

In his goals of “celebrating America without nationalism,” “transforming culture without domination,” and “redistributing wealth without socialism” Olson seeks to distance Evangelicalism from an identification with the Moral Majority, Religious Right, and the Republican party at prayer. Confessional Lutheranism would for the most part agree with his warnings against excessive nationalism, adoption of American civil religion, and the confusion of the roles of church and state among conservative Evangelicals. (Olson in one place wrongly links Luther with Calvin as an advocate of Caesaropapism in Protestant states. Some Lutheran states did confuse church and state—Luther did not.) We would also agree with his view that genuine Christian morality cannot be coerced by civil law and political action. (It does not, however, follow from this that Christian citizens should not work for laws restricting abortion, since such laws are not an attempt to legislate Christian morality but an attempt to protect life and limb, like a whole host of other laws.) Olson is also correct in his claim that Christi-

anity is not tied to any particular system of economics, but in reading this section one gets the feeling that Olson is not so much against political activism by Christians, but that he is for a more liberal form of political activism by Christians. He, for example, says Evangelicals can use secular arguments to support legislation to redistribute wealth, but does not seem to apply the same principle to laws against abortion or homosexuality. His argument seems to be more of a case of special pleading rather than a uniform application of principles.

Olson also makes some valid points in his arguments against coerced morality. In the section "building character without moralism" he correctly warns against promoting morality that is motivated by shame and against imposing man-made rules against activities which God has left free. He goes too far, however, when he states that that Jesus taught principles rather than rules, and that Jesus relativized those rules which he maintained. Olson fails to distinguish clearly between traditional rules and divine laws. Jesus did not relativize divine moral laws. Olson's failure to properly distinguish the roles of law and gospel is not surprising because it is a nearly universal tendency in Evangelicalism, but his lack of a proper distinction of the roles of law and gospel badly undermines his point here. For example, Olson states that Jesus was apparently unconcerned how the Greeks and Romans behaved. If this claim is true, the apostle Paul, who was Jesus' envoy to the Greeks and Romans, failed to get the message, since in Romans 1 and 2 he powerfully presents the law as a message for the whole world. Though setting up contrasts (e.g., character v. morality, doctrine v. orthodoxy, etc.) is one of Olson's favorite methods of arguing, he fails to deal with the most critical contrast of all, the contrast of law and gospel. He does this to such a degree that he is in danger of turning away from the legalism which he sees in fundamentalism toward the antinomianism of liberalism. The church's attitude toward sinful behavior outside the church should not be "wise resignation and acceptance" as Olson claims. The church's duty to a secular society is not to coerce behavior with civil law, but it is to preach the divine law with an evangelical aim. In his goal of "accepting without affirming flawed people" Olson is certainly on target when he condemns hypocrisy and selective morality. Olson is indeed evangelical in the best sense of the word when he says the person who is struggling against a sin, whatever it may be, should find acceptance and forgiveness in the church, but he seriously downplays the need for preaching the law to every person.

Two of Olson's theses concern worship and religion. He wants to be "religionless without being secular," and he wants to update worship without trivializing it. In his desire to be "religionless," Olson is punching a strawman that he has propped up, since he defines religion as

“fairly formalized, institutionalized, relatively tradition-bound worship.” This provides a pretty easy target. Though he grants that “religion” can be defined in different ways, Olson never gives serious attention to the concept of religion in the New Testament. The New Testament words for religion refer both to forms of worship and to a way of life. The first, εὐσέβεια, refers primarily to godliness or piety (1 Ti 2:2, 1 Ti 4:8, 1 Ti 6:11), but in one case it refers to doctrine-based piety (1 Ti 3:16). There can, of course, also be counterfeit religion (2 Ti 3: 5). Two other words (θρησκεία and λατρεία) refer to forms of worship, good and bad, but also to a godly way of life. “Religion (θρησκεία) that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (Ja 1:26,27). Only one of the New Testament words for religion (δαιμονία) is negative, and even this “religion” is a positive thing in so far as it includes a seeking for God. Rather than joining the popular trend to make “religion” a punching bag, Olson would have better served the church by showing what the biblical concept of religion really is. Olson has a similar problem with “doctrine” which he defines as “a Christian community’s consensus about the right interpretation of the Bible in the light of experience.” Olson sees faith as giving birth to doctrine rather than the biblical order of doctrine giving birth to faith. Doctrine is simply another word for biblical teaching. This problem is a reflection of Evangelicalism’s weak view of the means of grace.

While correctly arguing that there is no one biblical style of worship, Olson, who is relatively traditional in his worship preferences, tries to put a damper on worship wars. He support new forms, but he warns against confusing worship with entertainment.

The most serious issue raised by Olson is the relationship of Evangelicalism to the Bible and to biblical teaching. Olson claims that Evangelicals can be biblical without holding to orthodoxy or biblical literalism, that they can possess truth without certainty, and that they can relativize theology without rejecting it. Again a considerable part of his argument is strawman beating, based on his pejorative definitions. He regards orthodoxy as “enforced adherence to a written doctrinal system under threat of punishment for daring to question it.” “Orthodoxy” is simply right or straight teaching which gives glory to God. Many of Olson’s historical summaries of orthodoxy and confessionalism are likewise not accurate summaries but strawmen. For example, he says that we are following the spirit of Luther when we want to know if a doctrine is scriptural *and* reasonable before we follow it. (In such serious issues, for a statement to be half right is not good enough). Since Olson marginalizes the role of confessions as tools for defending the truth, what kind of biblical authority does he have left on which he can rely?

While Olson is correct when he claims that no one takes every word in the Bible literally and that everyone recognizes some figurative expressions in the Bible, this is somewhat beside the point because few advocates of what Olson calls "literal interpretation" claim that there is no figurative language in the Bible. What they are advocating could better be called contextual interpretation. The context indicates some sections are history, some are parables, etc. The problem is where Olson draws the lines between literal interpretation and literalism. His main examples of events in the Bible that need not be taken literally are the days of creation (actually all of Genesis 1-11 may be saga) and the account of Jonah. He admits that the New Testament treats Jonah as a historical person, but he makes the literary judgment that the book of Jonah is "parable-like." He insists that Evangelicals must believe in miracles, and he states that he would have a hard time accepting the claim that Abraham was not a real historical character since he is very important to biblical history. It is hard to see any objective basis for his claim that it is not necessary to take all the "history-like" parts of the Bible as history as long as nothing crucial to the biblical drama and message is lost. The irony is that what Olson is advocating is a kind of "biblical fundamentalism," since all that is necessary to Evangelical unity in the Scriptures is to agree in the fundamentals that are essential to that history. But how does one agree on what the fundamentals are? If the days of Genesis need not be historical, how much of the account of Adam and Eve is historical and how much is "parable-like"? If Jonah is dispensable, what about the Exodus, the victories of Joshua, Hezekiah's long day, Daniel's delivery, and Sennacherib's defeat? If one doubts Jonah, why not doubt these as well? On the other hand, if one can accept these, why doubt Jonah? These are questions Olson does not clearly answer.

Though Olson expresses his doubts that Tillich takes the Bible seriously, he nevertheless speaks with seeming approval of Tillich's view that doubt is an essential aspect of faith. Olson lacks certainty but believes in Truth. It is not clear where he places the edge of confidence. Of what is he certain?

As his sources of theology Olson uses the Wesleyan Quadrilateral of four authoritative sources of belief: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. He makes Scripture the first of the four sources, but this does not eliminate the problem. It is not just "theology" but the authority of Scripture itself that is relativized by Olson's approach. Olson claims the right to challenge traditional dogmas in the light of experience. Luther advocated the duty to challenge traditional dogmas in the light of Scripture. There is a crucial difference between these approaches. An example of "re-evaluating traditional belief in light of experience" is Olson's support for women pastors. Olson seems to be

seeking a middle ground between conservatism which does not accept women pastors and liberalism which destroys all complementary distinctions between men and women. This certainly seems to be a case of experience shaping the interpretation of Scripture, rather than vice versa. Going a step further in departing from tradition, Olson seems to have room within the parameters of Evangelicalism even for "open theism" which denies the omniscience and timelessness of God. If Evangelicalism is open to every view which claims support in Scripture, it is hard to imagine what limit there is to what is permissible.

Olson is seeking room within the boundaries of Evangelicalism for both conservative Evangelicalism (though hopefully not too fundamentalist) and for post-conservative Evangelicalism. The problem is that the view of Scripture which Olson calls "post-conservative" would have been called liberal or at best moderate by most of the founders and early practitioners of Evangelicalism, and the view of Scripture he characterizes as "fundamentalist" looks very much like the view of early Evangelicals. The problem, at least in relationship to the view of Scripture, is not that Evangelicalism has been invaded by fundamentalists, but that many Evangelicals have slid away from the early tenets of Evangelicalism. Is it fundamentalists or post-conservatives who are trying to change the boundaries of Evangelicalism?

Since we Lutherans are not Evangelicals though we are evangelical, it might seem that the debate about the meaning of Evangelical is only of peripheral interest to us. That may be true of the term, but the issues Olson raises about stretching the parameters of Evangelicalism are the same issues that are being raised by some who seek to stretch the parameters of confessional Lutheranism. The label which is being altered is different, but the areas of drift are the same. Furthermore, these areas of drift are beginning to impinge on the very heart of the gospel as we shall see in the following report.